Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	**No Archive Warnings Apply**
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Voltron: Legendary Defender
Relationship:	Keith/Lance (Voltron)
Characters:	Lance (Voltron), Keith (Voltron), Shiro (Voltron), Pidge | Katie Holt, Matt Holt, Hunk (Voltron), Allura (Voltron), Coran (Voltron)
Additional Tags:	Fluff, Hurt/Comfort, Keith is ticklish, Lance is smitten with his laugh, First Kiss, Pining Lance (Voltron), Pining Keith (Voltron), Galra Keith (Voltron), Keith is turning Galra, Touch-Starved Keith (Voltron), Mutual Pining, Eventual Smut, Smut, Bottom Keith (Voltron), Top Lance (Voltron), Angst with a Happy Ending, Getting Together, if you squint there's plot, the plot is they're gay
Language:	English
Collections:	Space Losers' Winter 2020 Collection
Stats:	Published: 2022-06-10 Updated: 2022-06-17 Words: 10478 Chapters: 2/4 Comments: 15 Kudos: 187 Bookmarks: 33 Hits: 1959

Lux Brumalis

dailyandgaily

Summary:

Following Keith's return from the Blade, he and Lance find that their dynamic has shifted for the worse. Their time apart has driven a wedge between them, wherein Keith had brought up his walls yet again, ruining the delicate balance they had achieved before Keith left.

So in a desperate attempt to garner Keith's attention, Lance goes out of his way to crack jokes, and in doing so, he makes Keith laugh for the first time. From that point onward, he makes it his life's mission to try and hear that laugh more often—wanting to use it to close this newfound divide between them. And in the process, he discovers that the intimidating and seemingly untouchable Keith Kogane is actually ticklish.

All the while, Keith is harboring a secret from the rest of the team. He's forced to reckon with his heritage as he comes to the horrifying realization that he's *turning* Galra, and there's no way for him to fix it. But it seems kismet has a different plan in mind when Lance finds out, refusing to let him deal with it alone.

Edit Chapter

Chapter 1: A Hint of Apricity

Notes:

《 quick note! 》
the timeline for this is a bit rough, but the basic idea is that Keith comes back from the Blade—after the Trials of Marmora (s2e8) but before he finds his mom—except Shiro *doesn't* go missing. the team knows Keith is half Galra, but everyone, including Keith himself, doesn't know he's turning Galra.

Shiro's still worried about a replacement in case the worst happens, so some days they train with Allura in Blue, Lance in Red, and Keith in Black. so they still have the problem of six paladins; and albeit Allura steps down so everyone is in their original configuration, Lance continues to doubt his place on the team.

one last, clarifying sidenote: Pidge goes by she/they pronouns (and doesn't mind gendered terms), and i alternate between them both when narrating.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The first time it happened, they were in battle.

It was the first fight the team had been thrust into since Keith had come back from the Blade, so sue Lance for wanting to impress him a little. The memory of Keith's return was still fresh, and it hurt, considering Keith had completely ignored him.

So Lance wanted to make a lasting impression. He wanted to be seen. He wanted to give Keith no choice but *to* notice him.

Because he was trying so hard, he couldn't quip into his helmet's receiver as much as usual. They all had their own ways of coping; Shiro meditated, Hunk cooked, Pidge worked on her tech, Keith brawled with the Gladiators, and Lance made jokes. It gave Lance a chance to lighten the mood, and beyond that, it helped distract his friends from the stress of it all, if only temporarily.

It was hardest to make the team laugh in battle. Back when they had first become paladins, when someone did laugh, it tended to be Pidge and Hunk. With time, though, he had come to hear everyone's laugh on the castleship—sans Keith.

Each of them had a specific laugh. Pidge laughed with a subdued volume, but they snorted loudly and their chest heaved. Hunk's laughter boomed, all smiles and warmth. The rare occasion with Shiro was surprising, but even more fun because albeit he doesn't lose his composure, he's still smiling and laughing along with them. Allura always tittered with a hand shielding her mouth, eyes alight with glee, and Coran's laugh reminded Lance of his late abuelo.

Keith never laughed. Not once since Lance had known him had he been able to make Keith laugh. It wasn't for a lack of trying, either.

"Focus, Lance!"

Speak of the devil.

Lance should have known today would be different. The two of them were separated from the rest of the team—day nine of doing rounds on planet Plæïre—when they had been ambushed. Their enemy was an opponent of their allies on this planet; two nations fighting over large tracts of land. To get an edge, the enemy teamed with the Galra, and their new allies, in turn, went to Voltron.

Tonight was a special, cultural ceremony, where locals thanked the spirits of Plæïre, and the spirits responded in kind by filling the sky with hundreds of raining stars. It was the perfect time to strike. That's why Lance and Keith were there, functioning as the first line of defense. They just needed to keep the opposition occupied as they waited for backup.

"Keith, duck!"

Without hesitation, Keith listened. Lance shot over Keith's crouched form, taking down an enemy that had snuck up behind them. He continued providing covering fire as Keith went in, getting close and personal as he slashed at the opposition.

Each step taken splashed water. The salt flat below their feet had a thin sheen of fresh rainwater coating it, wherein the reflection of the night sky was mirrored.

It was harsh land to live on. Still, somehow, trees had grown in sparse clumps around them, roots crawling above the surface and clinging to one another, twisting together like a mess of thick wiring. The trees climbed high in the brilliant night sky, eventually giving way to an aurora polaris that painted the atmosphere with color. Dozens of shooting stars rained down each second.

The border of their allies' nation lay a rough hundred feet away, the budding houses lit only by lanterns haloed in mist. Their flashlights got taken out—the bulbs shattering—when they were jumped, and the locals were practically grimalkin with their perfect night vision. It was hard for humans to see in this darkness, let alone fight in it. Even with Keith's Galra genes, he wasn't faring much better.

"Shit," said Keith. "We're surrounded."

"Great! We can attack in any direction."

"Lance, now is *not* the time!"

Suffice to say, it didn't take long for them to slip up and lose the scrimmage. Keith went down first. They had used the trees to their advantage, two shadows climbing up and jumping Keith from above, pinning him down. Before Lance could snipe them, he was tackled to the ground.

Keith's shouts melted into the chaos of it all. There were too many of them to throw them all off. If they got their helmets taken off, they would lose contact with the team. Lance activated the comms with a hand before it was twisted behind his back.

"Guys—" He cut off with a scream.

Visceral, hot pain flashed through the arm that had been twisted behind his back. To shut him up, one of the men had stabbed his upper arm. Cold steel dissevered flesh, slicing from his shoulder down to his elbow.

"Lance!" said Hunk.

"We're almost there," said Shiro. "Minutes. Just minutes."

"You *need* to buy a little more time," Pidge urged.

Lance focused on their voices, waiting for the pain to dull. Rope dug into his skin as his hands were tied behind his back, and a second set of rope was then used to bind his arms to his body. With a jolt, Lance felt the barbs interwoven into the material where they pressed against his skin. The cable dug into the gash on his arm, clearly tied that way with malicious purpose.

"G-Gotcha…" Lance said into the receiver.

When done, the man who bound him twisted the rope in his fist and *tugged,* hauling Lance's body backward and pulling the cable taut—the friction tearing into his flesh. His wound dehisced further as coarse rope shredded through it, the heat so severe it seared itself into his skin, and Lance cried out again.

Hot tears streamed down his face, his eyes blown wide with pain. He blinked rapidly until his vision cleared, and his breath left him as short, staccato pants. He looked over his shoulder, grimacing at the man behind him, all the while the others around them sneered and taunted Lance.

His head swam as he gauged their options, to no avail. Just one of these men had the strength of three humans; a physical struggle was impossible to win. He looked over to Keith, unable to do anything else as their bayards were wrenched away. Their helmets were taken next, torn off and thrown aside.

Brutal threats assaulted his ears, but out of everyone, one woman stuck out. The others walked around her, almost obsequious in the way they moved and adhered to her orders. She stood firm in front of the paladins, glowering at them without tilting her chin down.

Neon green tufts of hair curtained her eyes, but when she combed her fingers up through her bangs, Lance could make out her eyes. All four of them bore into Lance. One pair was positioned below the other, about half a size smaller. She spoke in a low, stringent voice.

"Reveal the location of your Lions or your death will be painful."

The Galra wanted that information. Retrieving it must have been the price for the Galra's aid. Lance needed to buy time; the moment they gave up their Lions, they would be killed.

"We'll tell you," said Lance.

A strangled noise escaped Keith's throat. *"Excuse me?"*

"Oh?" she said.

"We'll tell you," repeated Lance. "On one condition."

"Lance!" Keith reproached him.

He refused to look at Keith. He kept his eyes on the leader. Her eyes narrowed into golden slits, considering his offer. She blinked, the smaller pair of her eyes delayed by a second.

"…Let's hear it," she said.

Someone behind Lance grabbed a lump of his hair, yanking his head back and exposing his neck. Lance grunted, and he grimaced at the woman before him. He swallowed, hard, before he spoke up again.

"I started dating this chick from your planet… She's the best piece of ass I've ever had. If I tell you where our Lions are… You can't touch her."

Jeering laughter and crude remarks erupted from the others. Their leader silenced them with a simple wave and a smirk. She crouched down to where Lance was on his knees, and victory glistered in her eyes.

"Fuck it. Sure. What's her name and address?"

Lance grinned. "You don't know your own mother's name and address?"

In an instant, her smug expression fell, her confidence disappearing at a glimpse of his. Silence ensued, consuming the group around them. That's when it finally happened.

His comment startled a laugh from a place he'd never expect—Keith. It was a dumb joke, and Lance knew it, but Keith laughed. He laughed something bright with unbridled joy, head thrown back and eyes crinkled at the corners.

All at once, reality had frozen over. The enemy wasn't moving, and the distant clash of steel on steel faded alongside the screams echoing from the country's border—all Lance could hear was Keith's laughter. And it was surprisingly warm and sweet and beautiful, with starlight reflected in those dark eyes when they fluttered open again.

It startled Lance into complete and awed inaction. His heart stuttered, so taken aback by the sight that it twisted his gut into delightful knots. This was the first time he had made Keith laugh.

And he wanted to do it again.

The stillness of it all caught up to him then, the intense pulse of his heartbeat fading from his ears in a rush. With it, his sense of sound returned to him twofold; every noise sped up, jumbling together as he processed it all, as if making up for lost time. The surrounding fauna had stirred back to life, insects chirping and the sounds of wildlife accompanied by the clamor of the enemy, but Lance remained frozen in time.

A violent screech sounded off to the side of him—but he couldn't take his eyes off Keith. Then Keith turned to him, that gleam of amusement fading to horror, and pain exploded at Lance's temple.

Everything went black.

— ❖ —

Keith couldn't stop thinking about how Lance had gawked at him. Not since the moment Lance was knocked out, not since the team arrived moments later to rescue them, and not since they brought an unconscious Lance back into the medbay. The image continued to plague his mind in vivid flashes.

Lance had looked so astounded that he didn't seem to realize his jaw was reaching for the floor. But it was the silent awe invading those blue eyes that had wormed its way into Keith's brain, making its home there. Lance had almost looked *captivated* by him.

Keith shook his head. Those ideas were dangerous—misleading—and entertaining thoughts like that never ended well. He looked up at the pod in front of him. The rest of the team waited with him, crowding around the pod, waiting for the telltale hiss to catch Lance's fall.

The glass dissipated. Lance's body pitched forward, falling into Shiro's awaiting arms. A low but whiny rumble came from Lance as he got to his feet, rubbing at his eyes. The rapid shift from the inertia of a pod to a steady stream of consciousness was never easy; but Lance adjusted, mind catching up to reality.

His stupor didn't last. When it all clicked back into place, the first thing he did was scan the team, keen gaze landing on Keith. Wide eyes bored into deep mauve ones, and recognition flashed in Lance's eyes.

"I got you with a 'your mom' joke," said Lance, incredulous.

Everyone looked to him. Confusion suffused their gazes, adding to the tension in Keith's chest. Keith folded his arms.

"What're you talking about?" said Keith.

Lance got up out of Shiro's arms. He pivoted on his heel, facing his full body to Keith. His eyebrows drew together, and he threw his arms in the air as he spoke.

"What do you *mean* what do I mean?"

"Keith is a man of culture, Lance," said Pidge. "He would never laugh at that kind of joke."

Blatant sarcasm underlined her voice. Hunk hid his grin behind a closed fist, and Lance took immediate offense.

"Hey! Keith, my man, c'mon! Back me up here!"

Keith's lips twitched into a devious smile. "Don't remember. Didn't happen."

"…You bastard."

"Language!" said Shiro.

"The real question is why you let yourself get knocked out like that," said Keith.

"Whuh—?" Panic consumed Lance's expression. "I was tied up, mullet!"

Keith raised an eyebrow. His body relaxed now that the focus was no longer on him, and he dropped his arms.

"Your hands were tied so you couldn't move your head?"

Lance made a frustrated noise. "No, not… It just—It all happened so fast!"

"Yeah? Then why were you staring at me like that?"

That stopped Lance. He broke eye contact, gaze now glued to the floor. A healthy, florid tinge rose to his cheeks. He pouted, muttering under his breath.

"Dunno what you're talking about…"

"You idiots are lucky we showed up when we did," said Pidge.

The team went on, but Keith had tuned them out. His eyes stayed on Lance, and Lance's eyes stayed on anything but him. But Keith wouldn't forget—he couldn't. There had been *something* there. Keith had seen it, and he wanted to figure out what it meant.

"You're really doing okay?"

"*Yes,* Shiro, I'm fine," said Lance.

"Good. Then we don't have to cancel training for today."

Lance's exasperation dissolved in a flash, easily replaced by pure horror. Pidge and Hunk followed close behind, the trio devastated by the development.

"No, no! I-I mean—My head still *really* hurts—"

"Nope. You had your chance."

"Please."

"Uh-uh."

"Shiro!"

"Not happening."

"I can knock him out again!" said Pidge. "Lance, come here!"

"*Pidge,*" warned Shiro.

After a short break to haul Pidge away from Lance and stop her windmilling arms, the trio caved in to Shiro's command. They groaned and moaned their way to the training deck, Keith trailing a short distance behind.

"I haven't even showered yet!" whined Lance.

"You're going to have to shower after training anyway," said Shiro.

"My beautiful skin is going to *suffer.*"

"Oh, no," said Shiro, voice completely deadpan.

Along the way, Shiro had sent Lance to change. He then asked Hunk to fetch water pouches from the kitchen, and he told Pidge to call Matt to train with them. Once the others had left, Keith took his chance. He asked Shiro to train with Matt for the day instead of him. Shiro gave him a knowing look but nodded, saying nothing.

With that, they hit the training deck. Keith waited at the threshold of the room, leaning his upper arm against the doorframe. Pidge and Matt arrived first, passing him with accompanying smiles and waves. Hunk followed soon after, brawny arms carrying enough pouches for fifteen people. Allura walked beside him, giggling with Hunk as they made their way over.

"You supervising training again today?" asked Keith.

They both looked to him, surprised but not unpleasantly so. Allura reacted first, smiling as she clapped her hands together.

"Indeed I am!" she said.

Hunk shuffled on his feet. "Pidge wants to leave early to help Coran update the pods, so I'll train with Allura after our first break."

Keith's eyebrows jumped up to his hairline. When Allura trained, she went hard. She tore skin and broke bone. Since they had access to the pods, she had no issue pushing the others to their absolute limit for the sake of the universe.

"You have a death wish?" Keith asked Hunk.

Allura laughed. "I'm not that mean."

"Not mean. *Definitely* relentless," said Keith.

They exchanged a few more words before the two continued past him. Minutes passed as he watched the team spar from the doorway, then Keith felt a light tap on his shoulder. He turned around to find Lance, donning a typical henley and sweatpants.

"Finally," said Keith. "You take forever."

Lance held up a finger. "Uh, excuse you. I take a perfectly acceptable amount of time."

"Uh-huh. Ready to train?"

"Wha…? You waited for me?"

"'Course. Everyone else is already paired up."

Lance blinked at him. His eyes darted over Keith's shoulder, surveying the team behind him. His expression went through a series of emotions, shifting from confusion to shock to horror.

"Uh," said Lance. "You and me?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem?"

Frantic, blue eyes skipped between meeting Keith's gaze and looking behind him. A wobbly, slightly hysterical laugh left Lance's throat, and he raised a hand to rub at the nape of his neck. He waggled his free hand in the air.

"Nah, no, not at all—"

"I mean, you could always train with Allura," said Keith.

Lance's eyes widened with alarm. The sight was almost comical. It was no secret that Lance appreciated Allura's presence everywhere but the training deck.

"Allura's here?" said Lance, voice low.

"Is that a yes?"

"It very much is *not.*"

Keith chuckled. "Let's go then."

He grabbed Lance by the elbow and dragged him to a corner of the deck. They went through the motions, throwing jabs and feints. For each fist hurled his way, Keith returned one of his own, getting comfortable with the back and forth.

Then he sent a punch to Lance's shoulder, and Lance jinked to the side. As Lance pivoted, he seized Keith's arm, pulling Keith toward him. Keith's own momentum worked against him, and he pitched forward, tripping over Lance's leg and going to the floor.

Lance followed him down. He kept his weight on Keith, the warmth of Lance's body overwhelming his senses. In a single, smooth transition, Lance pushed Keith onto his back and bracketed Keith's hips with his legs. A string of curses flew from Keith's lips. Keith tried to regain the upper hand, bucking out from under Lance, but Lance gave no quarter.

He gripped at Keith's forearm, fingers locking in place. Tension coiled in Keith's gut as he shoved at Lance's shoulder, but Lance used his free hand to grab Keith's other wrist. He brought both Keith's hands above his head, pinioning them with one hand.

With how firm Lance's grip was, Keith was essentially incapacitated, but he continued to fight. He refused to call it. So Lance placed his unoccupied hand on Keith's stomach to keep him down. His fingers dug into Keith's skin, sliding a bit lower as Keith moved. A shameful heat blossomed from under Lance's hand at the gesture, spreading throughout Keith's gut.

Keith jolted up into his hand, gasping loudly, and then jerked away. Their eyes met, and Keith's expression clouded over with fear. Lance stared down at him in disbelief.

"*No way,*" he said in a breathy voice.

"Lance."

"You're ticklish?"

He stood no chance. Lance didn't wait for an answer; he already knew. He tickled Keith without mercy, forcing a volatile wave of laughter from his core. It was a deep, rich sound that brought an awful blush to Keith's cheeks. His face crinkled into a smile, his eyes unfocused and welled up with tears.

Still, Keith fought. He wriggled under Lance, and his attempts at shunting Lance away failed miserably. His wrists remained pinned, the position so intimate it only added to his embarrassment.

Then, as sudden as it came, the tickling stopped. Keith could breathe again, and his eyes fluttered open. His entire line of sight was captured by intensely blue, awed eyes paired with a complacent smile. The lack of distance between them stole Keith's breath away yet again.

"Holy shit," Lance whispered.

His breath grazed Keith's face, the warmth of his exhale making Keith shiver. They exchanged a brisk silence, broken by a screech from across the room.

"Keith's ticklish?!"

Pidge's shouting broke the spell Lance had on Keith. On impulse, Keith jerked forward and knocked his forehead against Lance's, bashing their heads together. They both groaned in pain, and Lance withdrew his hands, allowing for Keith to crawl backwards and escape from under him. He scrambled to his feet.

His gaze snapped to the others. Everyone was staring, expressions ranging from surprise to blatant amusement. A searing shame burned Keith's cheeks. He pleaded with Shiro using his eyes, desperate for help. The demon just smirked at him, only to shake his head a moment later, allowing his smile to fade.

"Enough," said Shiro.

"Hey, it's not my fault Keith's ticklish," Lance said as he righted himself.

"I don't want it to happen again."

"Wha—?" said Lance. "Shiro!"

Shiro brought up a hand to silence him. A distraught, dramatic agony overtook Lance's expression. Shiro gave him a few moments to prove his obedience, and Lance said nothing, his brows furrowing in indignation.

"All forms of tickling are banned while on the training deck," said Shiro.

Lance threw his hands up. "Oh, come on! You always tell us to use whatever we have to our advantage—even underhanded techniques!"

"Are you going to tickle the enemy, Lance?"

Hunk, Pidge, and Matt burst into laughter. Abashed by the comment, Lance's gaze dropped to his shoes, hand coming up to cup the back of his neck. Keith's heart clenched at the sight.

"I'm going to the bathroom," said Keith.

Without waiting for a response, he hurried out of the room and headed to the restrooms down the hall. He knew he was touched starved, but the degree to which he *enjoyed* Lance's touch made his cheeks burn with the heat of a hypergiant star. He walked past the communal showers and made a beeline to the wall of sinks.

He peeled off his gloves, watching his thumb slide from his opposite wrist up to his fingertips. As he put aside the first glove, his eyes took in a strange sight. A smattering of rich purple coated his knuckles.

There was no way he contused his fists while barely sparring with Lance. His eyebrows pinched together, and he pulled off the other glove. A stain alike in color but unique in pattern covered the back of his hand. He ran the pads of his fingers over the discoloration and *pressed,* but it didn't hurt.

A thought struck him, one so sudden that it sent chills down his spine. Keith turned on the tap, running it on its highest setting, and put his hands under the steaming water. He rubbed at the color, but it didn't fade. His heart beat quicker, and his breath stopped short in his throat.

"*Please, no,*" he whispered.

Notes:

the second chapter should be out next week! thank you for reading, and leave a kudos or comment if you like—i eat that shit up :)

i'm not even embarrassed that i got the "your mom" joke from a friend who sent me a tiktok, bc ik damn well Lance would use that app religiously. it fits him too well.

what i *am* embarrassed of is that i started this fic back in winter of 2020 for our server's Christmas writing event, but i didn't get to finish it in time. then i found this WIP again recently and had to complete it, so i hope you like it so far!

➳ My Socials ❣ | 【Our Discord】

Edit Chapter

Chapter 2: Hiemal Hope

Notes:

i take pride in having the weirdest, most obscure titles for my fics and chapters. i know no one will ever appreciate them as much as me, and i simply do not care. you will never stop me.

enjoy the update!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

It had been a few days since Lance discovered Keith was ticklish. Keith had been avoiding everyone. At first, Lance had thought Keith was only avoiding him, but the moment Pidge had brought up a similar experience, he knew. Something was wrong.

Pidge and Lance were watching Hunk bake in the kitchen. Keith's laughter replayed in Lance's mind, those striking eyes dancing in the starlight. Lance sighed, sitting atop a counter with one leg up, near Hunk's workspace. His chin was propped up on the palm of one hand as he spoke, gesticulating with the other.

"I can *use* this tickling, Pidge. What should I make Keith do that he normally never would?"

"Laugh at your jokes," they said.

His head whipped around to glare at them. *"…Bitch?"*

Pidge shot him a sweet smile, and Hunk cackled as he bent down to check the oven. Off to their left, the door hissed open, and Keith walked in, clear distress weighing down his every step.

Everyone fell silent as Keith crossed the room. He made a deliberate effort to avoid any and all eye contact with the others as he got himself a water pouch. He chugged the drink down in one go, and Lance found himself following the dip of his Adam's apple as he swallowed. A rivulet of water escaped the corner of Keith's mouth, streaming down his neck, and Lance felt his throat go dry.

The refrigerator door slammed shut. Lance jolted in place, eyes flickering sidelong to avoid getting caught. From his peripherals, he saw Keith crush the pouch in his fist and toss it into the disposal shoot as he left. The trio shared a perplexed look. Hunk mouthed a question to Pidge, and they shrugged in response.

It was no secret that a constant, bad mood had pervaded Keith's presence for days now. The question was why. Absently, Lance wondered—not for the first time—if he had really bothered Keith with what he pulled on the training deck. Without sparing the others a word, Lance pushed off the counter and chased after Keith.

"Hey, Keith! Wait up!"

Keith looked over his shoulder and pulled a face. He didn't stop walking, but he slowed down enough for Lance to catch up.

"What d'you want?" mumbled Keith.

"Just… I've noticed you've been kind of… *off* lately."

"…Okay?"

"And. Er, well, I…" He cut to the chase. "I didn't go too far, did I?"

On a long exhale, Keith stopped moving. He tilted his head back to look at the ceiling, eyes drifting shut as he sighed again. Then, as he opened his eyes and turned to Lance, his expression crumpled. All the petulant ire fell from his face. An arm pale as moonlight crossed his chest to clutch at his own shoulder, and Lance's eyes followed the motion.

"I'm not mad at you, Lance."

"Then why've you been so…?"

Lance caught a glimpse of Keith's wrist, completely derailing his train of thought. There, where black leather met ivory skin, were splotches of stark purple. The color slithered underneath his gloves, but the material wasn't long enough to cover it all.

Noticing the sudden shift in Lance's composure, Keith followed his line of sight. His eyes widened, and he rocked back on his heels, trying to hide his hands behind his back.

But Lance acted quicker, snatching one of Keith's wrists and pulling it towards him. His fingers skimmed the strange pigmentation. The deep purple rang familiar in his mind, but these weren't bruises. This was Galra purple.

"Keith, what—?"

Lance's eyes shot up, and Keith tore his hand away. Though Keith didn't maintain eye contact, he didn't make a break for it either, instead staying fully motionless.

"So that's why you always wear those gloves…" said Lance.

"*No.* It… It…"

"It what?"

"It doesn't…" Keith paused then shook his head, refusing to go on.

"…You weren't like this before?"

Keith's lips curled back, nose crinkling as a brutal anger etched across his face. Lance recognized it for what it was. Progress.

"No, okay?!" Keith shouted. "It's new! "It's *new,* are you happy now?"

The quiet that followed Keith's outburst hung heavy in the space between them. So this was a recent development then. For whatever reason, Keith's Galra heritage was beginning to manifest physically. Lance processed the information, trying to devise the next, best approach. But Keith had taken his silence as proof that he had made a mistake.

Keith whirled around, turning his back on Lance and abandoning their conversation. He left at a pace so brisk it bordered on outright speedwalking. Lance balked at his retreating form.

"Wha… Dude!" said Lance. "Hey!"

Lance went after him, but Keith broke out into a sprint, bolting down the corridor. Lance sped up to match, calling for Keith multiple times as they ran halfway across the ship. But he refused to lose sight of Keith, keeping pace even as they entered the Lions' hangar. Just as Lance feared that Keith might escape with Red, Keith whipped around, his voice hoarse.

"Go *away,* Lance!"

"I'm not just going to leave you on your own like this!"

Keith got up in his face. He seized the front of Lance's shirt, trying to appear as threatening as possible as he yanked Lance forward.

"I swear, I'm going to beat the ever-loving shit out of you," said Keith.

But Lance didn't budge. Instead, he provoked Keith directly by leaning into Keith's fist, driving their faces closer together. Lance brought his voice to a low rumble, grinning—all teeth and no fear.

"Oh, yeah? Try it, Kogane."

Keith shook with rage, fist trembling where it bunched up the fabric of Lance's shirt. He roughly shoved Lance away. A wet shine coated mauve eyes, and Lance watched Keith break. Keith's voice cracked as he shouted at the top of his lungs.

"I hate you! And I hate mom for leaving me to deal with this all on my own, and I hate that all I have left of dad are these stupid gloves—"

He tore them off, balling them up and throwing them as far as they would go. He started backing up as he spoke. After a few steps, his shoulder blades made contact with Red's paw, stopping him in his tracks.

"—and I hate the Blade for treating me differently, and I hate not knowing what's happening to my own body or why purple's all over… all over…!"

His scream broke off into a weak whimper. Keith's hands hovered in the air awkwardly, as if he didn't know what to do with them. He collapsed to his knees, burying his hands in the ebony locks of his hair.

The charged display stunned Lance into inaction; it had been such a tempest of emotion that a wave of pity crested high in Lance's chest. Slow as he could, Lance sidled up to Keith and kneeled beside him.

Like this, Keith's hands were hidden in the shock of his hair. Lance couldn't have that. So he cradled Keith's hands between his own, tentatively prying Keith's wrists forward, bringing them up to his own chest. Keith didn't fight him; he kept his head bowed, sniffling quietly.

"You're not alone in this," said Lance.

"…Bullshit."

Yet Keith's voice lacked conviction. So Lance swept onward, keeping his voice as gentle as possible, not wanting to scare Keith off.

"None of us are going anywhere."

"None of you even know what's going on," Keith shot back.

"I do now. Do you see me going anywhere?"

Keith stared up at him with big eyes. A wet laugh escaped him, tears trailing down his cheeks as he grimaced.

"Don't… Don't do that," said Keith.

Lance frowned, tilting his head to get a better look at Keith. He gently knocked the sides of their heads together and huffed.

"Do what? Comfort you? Speak the truth?" Lance said. "Would you prefer I make fun of you?"

"…Honestly?"

Their eyes met, and they both chuckled quietly. Lance understood; while nonconventional, their rivalry had bonded them. It had become the norm, it had become safe and comfortable.

"I can do that," said Lance.

A dumb grin captured his lips. He leaned back and poked Keith's forehead with two fingers. Keith's eyes tracked the motion.

"You're an idiot for thinking this changes anything, mullet."

But Lance could have never prepared himself for what came next. Keith gave him the most heartfelt smile, a trace of soft delight crinkling around his eyes. The sheer, vulnerable beauty of the look had Lance forgetting how to breathe. Then the doubt returned to furrow Keith's brow.

"Please… don't tell the others," said Keith.

"I won't. I swear." He paused. "But there is one thing I can't promise you…"

Keith looked at him, mortified, but it was short-lived. Lance pinned him against Red's paw and tickled him. The reaction was instant. Keith squealed, Lance blown away by the sound. He squirmed against Lance as he barked out laughter, his shoulders hiked up to his ears.

"I never promised I'd stop doing this," said Lance.

"Why?!" Keith screeched.

He leaned in to whisper in Keith's ear. "I don't like seeing you so sad."

"D-Dick!"

This was such a different side to Keith. Lance was rendered breathless by it, awe plain on his face as he stared. He had come to realize that Keith blushed a beautiful red like this, and when he laughed this hard he struggled to breathe. To top it all off, it was impossible for Keith to hold back a smile.

Usually, Keith was too hard to read, but when he laughed, he was an open book. It was such a refreshing sight. The smile that pulled at Keith's lips melted Lance's heart, his smile growing alongside Keith's.

"Puh—" Keith gasped. "*Please.*"

"Please what?"

"Don't… tease me!"

Keith tried to kick him, but Lance grabbed his ankle and pulled him closer. It put Keith in an even worse position, now flat on his back as Lance loomed over him. Keith continued to laugh, eyes squeezed shut and at Lance's mercy. Lance was drunk on the sight.

Being between Keith's legs weakened Lance's hold on his own sanity. Temptation coiled tight in his gut, and he forced himself to pull away. Keith rolled onto his side, fighting for air. His palms trembled as he held himself up. Lance tried to shift his focus away from a panting, red-faced Keith.

Lance sat with his back against Red. After a few seconds to compose himself, Keith joined him. But with the fatigue that bore down on Keith, he leaned heavily against Lance's side.

"The next time you get all moody on me, I won't let you off as easy," said Lance.

"Next time you try that… I'll bite you."

"Hot."

Keith blinked, startled by his response, then burst out into laughter. He clutched at his stomach, nearly doubling over.

"*Fuck*, this hurts," Keith said between laughs.

"Are you feeling any better?"

Keith wiped at his eyes, nodding. He swayed backward, letting himself lie against Red for support. Lance smiled.

"A bit," Keith said before mumbling, "thanks to you."

That brought a pleasant rush to Lance's chest. He figured he should switch topics, not wanting to revert all his hard work.

"We don't know much about your mom besides…"

"She's Galra," said Keith.

"Yeah, but… your dad?"

Tension faded from Keith's shoulders at the new line of inquiry. It was a relief to the both of them, Lance careful to maintain the easygoing atmosphere. Keith's smile, small as it was, took on a wistful edge.

"He was pretty cool. He showed me how to hold my own in a scrap and how to tend to my wounds."

"I bet you were the type of kid who always got into trouble, even before the Garrison."

Keith huffed. "You're not wrong."

"Did he ever get mad at you for it?"

"Nah. Actually, when I was thirteen, I was stupid enough to think stealing a hoverbike from a gang was a good idea."

Lance choked on air. "What?"

"Two of their guys caught me and I got my ass kicked."

"Christ." "It probably would have been worse if my dad hadn't shown up. He knocked them both out, but… he got pretty beat-up."

"Man…" said Lance. "He must have been so pissed."

"He was only mad that I let myself get caught." Keith tilted his head back, smiling. "He taught me how to build my own hoverbike after that."

"You mean, the one you drove the night we rescued Shiro?"

"Yep. Back when my dad lived in Texas as a kid, his dad taught him the same."

"You're a cowboy?!"

"Huh?"

"Your dad's from Texas!"

Keith gave him a dry glare. "Yes…"

"Can I get a 'yeehaw'?"

"No."

Lance pouted at him, pushing his bottom lip out and bringing his hands together in prayer. Keith fixed him with a look, rolling his eyes. But he relented, obliging Lance's request, tone drier than the Atacama.

"Yee*haw*."

Lance fumbled for something in his pockets, fishing out the little holopad tablet that Allura and Coran had given each of the team. It served as a communication device for non-emergencies as well as capturing photos or videos—or, as Lance so intelligently put it, a rudimentary "space phone".

"Okay, okay!" Lance muttered.

"What *now*?"

"Admit you're a cowboy!"

He brought the phone up to Keith's face, primed to take Keith's picture. In an act of defiance, Keith tried to slap the tablet away but was beaten by Lance's quick reflexes.

"Mullet!" he whined. "I need proof, otherwise Hunk and Pidge won't believe me!"

"Sucks for you."

"Pleaaseee!"

"I'd rather eat glass."

The grin Lance hid behind his phone fell away, an intimidating gleam surfacing in his eye. It quieted the temerity in Keith's gut. The blood drained from Keith's face, and his stomach dropped. He recognized the imminent threat before Lance could voice it.

"Say yeehaw," he said in a low voice.

"I'm not saying it again."

"Keith. I will tickle you."

"*FUCK*. YEEHAW. YEEHAW! *STOP*."

— ❖ —

Something shifted between them after that exchange, something which altered their interactions in the days that followed. They began to spend time together without the others, no longer hiding behind the excuse of begrudgingly accepting the other's presence while among mutual friends.

Every so often, Lance would visit Keith's room or vice versa, and they would share the same space despite doing separate things. At times, they would fill the silence with banter or inquisitive conversation, while at other times, they would enjoy each other's company in comfortable silence. When they were both particularly bored, they would watch movies or go to the pool and wrestle.

Tonight, Lance had finally coerced Keith into doing skin care and painting their nails. They were in the middle of doing face masks, standing around in Lance's bathroom as Lance bemoaned an imaginary zit on his face. Keith watched from the doorway, snorting at the anguished faces Lance was making in the mirror.

Wide, blue eyes darted to meet Keith's intent gaze. Lance's reflection gawked at him, his slouched form jolting to stand ramrod straight. Confusion brought a crease to Keith's brow, and he tilted his head in a silent question.

"You *snort*?" said Lance.

Keith panicked. "No."

"That's the *cutest* thing ever?! I–I need to catch that on camera!"

"I do not snort!"

Lance snatched his phone from the bathroom countertop, grinning as he turned around. He shoved the camera in Keith's face, and Keith brought up his hands to block it. His face was caked in weird goo that was meant to serve as a face mask. He didn't want the team to see him like this—soft and pliant to Lance's requests. Shiro would never let him live it down.

Still, Keith's attempts to shield his face didn't stop Lance. He continued to record with a renewed zeal, trying multiple different angles until Keith groaned and dropped his hands.

"What nose do?" said Lance. "Do it snort?"

Keith tried not to laugh at something so stupid, a valiant effort that was abated by his lips cracking into a tiny, slanted smile. He shot Lance a deadpan look, replying in a flat voice.

"It snorts cinnamon. Just pure lines of cinnamon."

"What the *fuck*." Lance wheezed.

Keith covered his smile with the back of his hand, his eyes a soft mauve. Lance recovered, and his eyes softened, hands lowering so he could look at Keith properly.

"I'm really glad you came back," said Lance.

The sheer authentic lilt to his comment made Keith pause. He didn't think anyone else really cared that he had come back from the Blade except Shiro. Keith's heart tightened in his chest.

"Me too."

The moment lingered, neither wanting to break it, until an incessant ringing resounded from Lance's phone. They both jumped, having forgotten the alarm they had set only minutes prior.

"Oh!" said Lance. "Time to wash off these masks."

Both moved to stand and made their way to the bathroom. Lance went to the sink first and turned on the faucet. He ran his hand under the water, testing the temperature before he sluiced his face clean of goo. Blindly, he rifled for a towel, hand gliding across the countertop. As his fingers closed around a towel, his spine straightened, and he patted his face dry.

The towel was put aside, and cobalt eyes met Keith's in the mirror. His reflection smiled something lopsided and sweet, and he beckoned Keith over. A belated sort of realization shot through Keith that he voiced aloud.

"I'm not taking off my gloves."

It didn't matter that Lance already knew. He hated seeing what his Galra genes had done to his own hands. It was different when they went swimming; he didn't have to focus on the dark stains splattered across his hands and upper back. Here, they were about to paint their nails, obligating Keith to at least half an hour of staring at the nauseating purple along his knuckles.

Lance gave him a look that Keith couldn't decipher. It wasn't quite disappointment but something quieter and more somber. Then Lance turned away with a sigh, patting the empty space on the countertop.

"Sit here."

A bit confused by the command, Keith hesitated, but Lance paid him no mind, running a hand towel under the water. Steeling himself, he did as Lance said. He turned his back to the counter and raised himself with his palms, sitting atop its surface.

Lance came to stand between Keith's legs, not at all shy as he cupped his hands under Keith's knees. He easily hauled Keith forward, his body pressing against Keith's abdomen and inner thighs. The way Lance manhandled him with such ease sent chills through Keith, and he froze like a deer caught in headlights.

Before Keith could adjust to the close proximity, Lance brought up a hand to hold Keith's chin. Lance looked down toward the sink, hand grabbing something out of Keith's peripherals.

"Uh… What're you…?" asked Keith.

Lance raised an eyebrow as he looked back at Keith, bringing the wet cloth to Keith's face. He massaged circles into Keith's skin, rubbing off the face mask starting from his cheek.

"If you're going to be stubborn about it," Lance said, "I'll just do it for you."

The physical contact, however slight, made Keith's insides flutter, and his face heated up under the attention. He averted his eyes, unable to return the adamant gaze studying him. If Lance noticed, he didn't comment on it.

Instead, Lance kept his focus on the task at hand. He was gentle with it, using the washcloth to clean portions of goo off Keith's face before turning away to run the towel under hot water. The entire time as he worked, Lance refused to introduce space between them. The process was slow, but Keith reveled in the warmth of Lance's touch. With the swipe of Lance's thumb, Keith's eyes fluttered, not closing but remaining hooded.

It was easy to become lost in the alternating sequence of touch. From a firm hand turning Keith's jaw to a new angle to the smooth brush of wet cloth against skin, Keith zoned out so much that he didn't notice when Lance had finished.

"That should do it," said Lance.

A hand patted the side of Keith's face, startling his eyes open. But Lance had already moved on, opening a lower cabinet to grab a tube of lotion and a small vial of oil. Cold air rushed to flood the space Lance had left, prompting goosebumps to spread across Keith's skin.

"Thanks," said Keith.

He was taken aback by the poise of his own voice but was relieved nevertheless. Lance sent him a sidelong smile, blue eyes flickering to his before returning to the mirror. Keith hopped off the counter and watched Lance as he dotted his face with dabs of lotion. After lightly spreading the moisturizer, he uncapped the vial, the pleasant scent of citrus entering the air, and added some of the oil to his face.

With that, Lance passed the two onto Keith. It was clear what Lance expected of him; Keith could manage this without taking off his gloves. He tried to copy Lance's movements, grimacing as he stared at himself in the mirror.

"Don't rub the lotion into your skin," said Lance.

He looked to Lance's reflection. It was a good excuse to stare at Lance's strong hands and slender fingers as he smoothed the salve over his face. Lance continued on with his explanation, none the wiser.

"Once you add the oil, you gently press it into your skin."

"Does that… help?"

"Does it—" Lance broke off with an amused smile and shake of the head. "Yes."

"Okay."

"Doesn't this feel nice?"

Keith made a face. "I… guess. Are we almost done?"

"Pfft. Yeah, yeah. There's just one more thing."

Keith groaned. Although, to his relief, instead of some convoluted form of self-care, Lance brought out a small tube of lip balm. Keith tried not to stare as Lance made use of it, then Lance extended his hand, proffering it to Keith.

"I've never…" said Keith.

Those two words alone confounded Lance, eyes blown wide. His head leaned forward as he gaped at Keith. Needing overt confirmation, Lance finished Keith's sentence for him.

"You've never used chapstick before?"

"Why… would I?"

"Dear god, how have you survived this long…?"

Lance tutted, stepping back into Keith's space. His eyes dipped down to Keith's mouth, and Keith's lips parted in shock as the balm pressed to his lower lip. Lance finished applying the balm, muttering to himself as he walked out of the bathroom.

"You actually have pretty nice lips for a *heathen*."

The comment startled Keith so much that he burst out laughing. He followed Lance into his bedroom, readying himself for their next activity—painting their nails. Lance whirled around abruptly, taking Keith by the hand as he slowed to a stop in the center of the room. The sudden gesture made Keith's eyes widen, but Lance kept his gaze on Keith's hand, turning it over gently in his own.

Tan fingers insinuated along Keith's glove and down to his wrist, where he proceeded to undo the strap. A stake of fear struck through Keith's heart, dark eyes darting to Lance's.

"Lance—!"

But Lance was already looking at him. A deep solemnity shrouded his blue eyes, adding a tension to the exchange that hadn't been there before. He looked through him, searching for something, as a dark furrow formed between his brows.

"What're you so afraid of?"

Keith sucked in a breath. "I…"

He averted his gaze. Blood rushed through his ears, and he hung his head, letting his bangs fall into his face. Lance gave his hand a light squeeze. That small, reassuring motion was enough to break the dam, and Keith was talking again.

"You say it's fine *now*, but what happens when it gets worse? What happens when I turn into some purple *freak* with fangs, slitted eyes, and cat ears? What… What happens when I change so much you don't *recognize* me anymore?"

The words came out in a rush, heat burning behind Keith's eyes. He blinked it away and shook his head. His heart ached.

"It wouldn't matter."

Lance spoke with such bold sincerity that it silenced every dark thought that flooded Keith's mind. Keith looked up from behind his bangs. That same solemn tone translated into Lance's expression, and Keith could no longer look away. Blue eyes slid back down, a soft smile gracing Lance's face as he gently tugged off Keith's glove.

"You could sprout fur all I care," said Lance. "You'd still be the same moody asshole I fight alongside every day. You'd still be my Keith."

An explosion of warmth spread deep within Keith's chest. It clawed its way up his neck to dust his cheeks red, singeing the tips of his ears, and he swallowed hard.

Lord, help me.

Keith's free hand trembled as he brought it up to brush his hair back. He blinked, and a tender hand touched his face. Keith flinched, and Lance froze, yet neither took the opportunity to move away.

After a terse exchange of silence, Lance moved his hand. He tucked a few rebel strands of hair behind Keith's ear, huffing to himself.

"Should probably get you a few hair ties."

Lance didn't withdraw his hand, instead moving downward to cup Keith's face. Keith stopped breathing. Lance skated the back of two fingers along Keith's cheek before pulling away. Unable to handle the growing tension, Keith blurted out the first thought on his mind.

"*My* Keith?" he echoed.

Lance chuckled, and Keith's throat went dry. He shot Keith a disarming smile that went straight to Keith's heart.

"I would've said 'our', but I think Pidge would disown you if you became a catboy."

"Fuck off," Keith said through a smile.

As swift as it had come, the tension between them dissipated. Lance turned his back to Keith, opening his bedside drawer to pull out a translucent container filled to the brim with nail polish bottles. He tossed it onto the bed, the bottles clacking as it hit the mattress.

"How'd you manage to get these anyway?" asked Keith.

"Pidge made them."

"Figures."

"I don't know how she did it, but she made them so they dry, like, ten times faster than normal polish."

"Huh. That's cool."

The mattress creaked as Lance sunk into it. He crossed his legs, planting his palms on his knees as his body canted forward. There was an eager quality to the position, almost childish as Lance grinned up at Keith.

"I wanted to have a girls' night with them and Allura, but…"

The brightness to his smile dimmed, faltering as his eyes glazed over. The shift lasted half a second before Lance wiped it from his face. It would have been imperceptible to anyone else—but not Keith.

"They've been too busy for silly shit like that," said Lance.

"It's not silly if it makes you happy."

Lance stilled, blinking at him before looking away. A small smile tugged at his lips, and he brought a hand to hold the back of his neck. With his other hand, he smacked the spot beside him in invitation.

"Come on," said Lance. "Sit with me."

Not one to turn Lance down, Keith acquiesced his plea. He mirrored Lance, facing him as they sat cross-legged. There was little room between them, knees touching as they prepared the space. Lance placed a hand-towel in each of their laps in case of spills before going for the container of nail polish.

"What colors you want?" asked Lance.

"Black."

In a flash, Lance's expression fell flat. Disappointment contorted his lips into a scowl as he stared at Keith.

"That's so boring."

"You're boring," said Keith.

"Pick something else, you emo freak."

"Make me."

"I'll let you pick literally anything but black."

"Gray."

Lance groaned loudly as he threw his head back, earning a smile from Keith. The bottles clattered as Lance scoured through them, taking the analogous color before tossing it to Keith, who caught it midair.

"What're you going with, then?" Keith said.

"I'm doing the bi flag."

"Ah–*huh*?"

An undignified sound escaped Keith. Mind blank from shock, all he could do was stare. There was a shift in the way Lance held himself then, and it hung over the two like Damocles's sword. He appeared on edge, eyes dark with apprehension as he tested the waters.

"Is that… a problem?"

"You're bi?" Keith shot back.

"I am. So what?"

"I'm gay," he breathed out.

The antagonistic air to their exchange evaporated. Absolutely baffled by this revelation, Lance remained silent for several seconds before breaking into a blinding smile.

"For real?" said Lance.

Keith nodded furiously, still a bit dazed. "I thought everyone knew."

"Dude, I didn't realize Pidge was enby until they announced it that one day Shiro told us to 'man up'. Fucking… everyone knew but me."

"Holy shit. You're right. Why do you have such a dollar store gaydar?"

That shocked a raucous laugh from Lance. He looked so happy; it was such a charming look on him. Keith was addicted. He tried not to smile back, but it was impossible with Lance beaming at him like that. He fought to keep the line of his lips flat, but Lance's delight was contagious, and his lips wobbled into an adoring smile.

"Don't shit-talk my gaydar!" Lance said, grinning. "How come you didn't know I was bi, then, huh?"

Albeit accusatory in tone, there was no bite to his comment. Still, Keith took it to heart, responding genuinely.

"I mean… I've never once seen you flirt with another guy."

"That's 'cause I alrea—"

Whatever Lance had planned on saying, it had rooted him to the spot. He had swung from pointedly self-assured to disarmingly quiet, stopping mid-word with his finger in the air. Then he snapped back into action, averting his eyes and going back to picking out nail polish.

"I'm… *picky*, all right?" Lance murmured.

It struck Keith as a sensitive topic. He hadn't meant to hit a nerve and he didn't want to lose the nice atmosphere they had built up, so he tried to deviate to another line of conversation.

"I get that."

He really did. To him, only one man stuck out—that held him hostage body and mind, but he couldn't say that. Instead, he drew attention back to something Lance was comfortable with.

"So are you, uh… doing both hands the flag?"

The redirection worked, and Lance perked up. He placed the three bottles of polish in his lap, each softer tones than the traditional solid colors. He pointed to each bottle then the corresponding fingers as he spoke.

"I'm doing two fingers pink, the middle purple, and these last two blue."

Lance paused, sudden cognizance misting over his eyes. He grabbed onto Keith's wrists, gaze darting rapidly from the nail polish bin to Keith, a mischievous smirk playing on his lips.

"What is it?" asked Keith.

"Let's paint your nails the rainbow flag."

There was a playful glint to Lance's eyes. Relieved it hadn't been a grievous realization, Keith laughed. He tried to jostle Lance's grip from where it encircled his wrists, but he couldn't shake him off.

"No!" Keith shouted, smiling.

Lance put his palms on either side of Keith's face, squishing his cheeks together. Keith didn't bat him away, too busy laughing. Leave it to Lance to pick the most obnoxious, eye-catching colors for him possible.

"Pleaaseee," said Lance.

"No," Keith repeated, drawing out the word.

Lance pinched his cheeks. It didn't hurt, but Keith smacked Lance's chest, his other hand clinging to Lance's wrist in an attempt to pry it away.

"Have some *fun*," said Lance.

"Uh-uh. I'm the boring one, remember?"

"Keeithhh!"

"Nope."

"Let me, let me, let me."

Lance began to chant, spoken with the same stubbornness that Keith fell in love with. Still, Keith had to maintain appearances, so he rolled his eyes, feigning irritation. He let Lance go on for a few more seconds before giving in.

"Ugh, fine!"

"Yes!" Lance's hands shot up into the air, victorious.

"But only *one* hand."

"Okay, okay!"

In a decisive gesture, Lance plucked the brightest red from his collection and pushed it into Keith's chest. Without pausing, he went back to look for an appropriate orange.

"You can't take it back now," said Lance.

Keith smiled. "I won't."

Not when it makes you this happy.

They decided on painting Keith's nails first, wherein they discovered Keith was especially bad at it. Even with Lance's direction, he struggled, lacking in precision and painting more of the flesh of his thumb red than the nail.

Before he could grow frustrated, Lance took the brush from him with a gentle smile. He used the towel to clean the outline of his nail, removing the excess paint. After he painted a second coat, he moved onto the next finger, painting it orange.

"Here," said Lance. "Watch me, then you can do the other hand yourself."

Within minutes, Lance had finished the first hand. It was such an impressive feat that it left Keith stunned. Not only did he work fast, he left no room for error. It looked professionally done.

"You let that dry first, then—" Lance interrupted himself with a sharp inhale. "I forgot to set an alarm."

"For what?"

"For when our nails dry."

"Oh," said Keith. "You don't just… guess?"

"And ruin it when you're wrong?"

"Fair enough."

"Can I use yours?" asked Lance. "I left my phone in the bathroom."

"Sure."

Lance set the alarm on Keith's tablet before he began to paint his own nails. Enamored by his skill, Keith allowed himself to stare. Lance just made it look so easy. About a quarter of the way through, Lance spoke without looking up.

"You can start with the other hand now."

"Oh."

Slightly embarrassed, Keith hung his head and looked down at his lap. He set a hesitant pace, uncapping the gray polish as he tried to copy Lance. Lance, on the other hand, had already finished, flapping his hands in the air to dry them faster.

"Oh, *dude*," said Lance. "Hunk told me this fun fact the other day and it blew my mind."

"Tell me."

"Apparently, when you smile, the nerves in your tongue essentially paralyze. So you can't actually feel your tongue when you smile."

Keith tried it, giving a weird, askew smile. He realized his mistake half a second too late. Lance tapped Keith's cheeks with the pads of his fingers.

"Fucking idiot." Lance said, taking on a teasing grin. "You look cute, though."

Keith's heart sank, his throat constricting. He knew Lance was only messing around, but the joke left a bittersweet taste in his mouth.

"I can't believe you actually fell for that," said Lance.

He smacked Lance's hands away and tried to force his expression into something more neutral. He went back to finish the last of his nails, painting his pinkie its final coat. Lowering his voice into something more intimidating, he glowered at Lance.

"Keep it up, and I'll kick your ass."

Lance stuck out his tongue. He began packing up all the nail polish back into its container, movements careful but smooth. Keith handed over the gray polish.

"You wouldn't ruin our self-care night," said Lance.

"You're right." Lance gave a smug smile, but Keith continued. "But the next time we're on the training deck, I'll wreck you."

It came out more suggestive than Keith would have liked, but Lance didn't falter. Rather, it seemed to fuel his arrogance.

"Hmm, that's weird," said Lance. "I don't remember that happening last time."

A light blush filled out Keith's cheeks. A wave of indignation had him sitting up on his knees as Lance walked to the bathroom. Keith raised his voice so he could be heard across the distance.

"That's not… Shiro wouldn't—!"

"Aw, you really think he'd stop me in time?"

"I… I swear, I told you, I'd bite you!"

"Again, not quite the deterrent you think it is!"

Keith spluttered. "What is *wrong* with you?"

Laughter echoed from the bathroom. Lance walked back in, slipping his holopad into his pocket as he made his way over.

"So many things," said Lance.

He sat on the edge of the bed, leaning over to inspect Keith's nails. He took the hand Keith had painted gray, lifting it for a better look and tilting it in the light. Keith tried to ignore the natural splatter of purple that plagued his skin.

"You think they're dry?" asked Lance.

"Yeah, timer finished a minute ago. It was just on silent."

"Perfect."

"Why—?"

Hands rushed to Keith's torso, tickling him. He should have known better. He yelped, trying to squirm away, moving further back onto the bed, but Lance only followed him. Lance kept moving until he was looming over Keith, one knee parting Keith's legs to keep him in place so he couldn't roll.

"Stop!" Keith shrieked.

He thrashed against Lance. The thought of biting him did cross Keith's mind, but no part of him was close enough. With nothing else open to him, Keith repeated himself as he laughed.

"Stop!"

"Will you let me take another video?"

"Y–Yes," Keith gasped. "Stop!"

It stopped. A slow smile grew across Lance's face as Keith caught his breath. Keith tried to sit up, having dropped onto his back while laughing.

"What do you *want*, you demon?" said Keith.

Lance arched an eyebrow, the look alone enough to silence Keith. Seeing Keith obey him with such ease brought a sly gleam to Lance's eyes. Lance brandished his phone, priming it to record.

"Say uwu or perish."

"No. Lance—"

"No?"

Panic gripped Keith's body. "W–Wait. Lance, don't—"

There was no escape, it was too late. Lance tickled Keith with one hand and held his phone with the other. He scrambled to grab onto Lance's arm but lacked the strength to fight, only able to clutch onto him to anchor himself. It felt so much more intimate this way; they weren't in a communal, public space that held a casual air. They were in bed, alone, where no one could walk in on them.

Shrill laughter continued to spill from Keith's lips. The noises coming from his mouth bordered on squeals, the realization downright humiliating. This wasn't the way Keith imagined himself clutching at Lance's bedsheets.

"*Shit*," said Keith.

That dangerous thought had Keith's breath quickening. Tears pooled in his eyes, and his shirt began to ride up, exposing pale skin. Slender fingers slid from fabric to bare skin, the touch electrifying. Keith gasped, fear mixing in with arousal. He broke then.

"Please, I c–can't *breathe*."

Lance stopped. He withdrew his hand, but he didn't wait for Keith to recover. Keith clutched at his stomach, desperately sucking in air.

"Say it," said Lance.

Keith scowled at the camera. He made a point to speak slowly, dragging out the word to pack it with hatred.

"Uwu."

"*Nice.*"

Lance stopped recording, rewinding the footage so he could watch. Keith covered his eyes with his hands and let out a low groan.

"This is so unfair," mourned Keith.

An idea struck him. It gave Keith hope, so swift and overbearing that he was almost disappointed he hadn't thought of it sooner. He dropped his hands so he could watch Lance's reaction.

"Are you ticklish?" asked Keith.

Lance shrugged, putting away his holopad to lean back on his palms. Keith called his bluff, knowing full well that Lance was talented at putting up a front. So he tried to tickle Lance, but Lance didn't react in the slightest, no fear behind his eyes as he grinned down at Keith.

It left Keith looking like a fool, his fingers pressed into Lance's abs and sliding across warm planes of muscle. Lance remained unbothered, leisurely cocking his head to the side. He looked obscenely hot like this, all smug and amused. It inundated Keith with such shame that he pulled away, trying to ignore the heat building in his stomach as he buried his face into the mattress. A single thought entered his mind.

I'm so fucked.

Notes:

this is a small note—bc idk how clear i made this—but the reason Lance chooses the traditional queer flag (rainbow) for Keith and not the homosexual flag (blues and greens) specifically is bc Lance wanted to do the brightest, most eye-catching colors possible he wants the others to notice so he brag about being responsible.

fun fact, knismesis and gargalesis are the scientific terms for tickling! knismesis refers to light, feather-like type of tickling. meanwhile, gargalesis refers to harder, laughter-inducing tickling, and involves the repeated application of high pressure to sensitive areas.

also, tickling was used in the courts of ancient china as a form of torture; this was during the Han Dynasty! it was used as punishment for nobility since it left no marks and its victim could recover relatively easily and quickly.

i just think they're neat, goofy little facts, and i thought i'd share them with you. see you next week :)

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